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Speaking in public

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Notes for
community leaders



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What is effective speaking?

Good public speaking is the art of good conversation carried a step or two further.

It is largely through the spoken word that we communicate with each other, develop understanding, exchange knowledge and find mutually acceptable goals. Through effective public speaking we can encourage, teach, entertain and inspire.

The principles that are the basis of good conversation are the principles of effective public speaking. When talking to friends, we speak naturally, directly and spontaneously. Our conversation becomes more thoughtful when we have a serious idea to convey. If we are convinced that our idea is sound, we try to present it clearly and logically.

When we talk to our family, for instance, and describe an experience or attempt to persuade them that some idea of ours is a good one, we use simple, direct language and we look at each person as we talk. In a larger group, such as a club, most conversations are on the same basis, except that we are likely to concentrate on a single subject of common interest. The speakers of a club group direct their thinking toward the special purpose for which they are meeting, and choose their words more carefully than they do in casual conversation.

In speaking to an audience these principles of good conversation should be followed. In addition, we should speak up so everyone can hear. We may assume a little more dignity than in everyday conversation and we will make sure our statements are based on fact.

Effective speaking then is simply persuasive conversation developed and adapted to:

- fit the occasion
- further a special purpose
- suit the people who listen.

Since all of us practice conversation every day when we talk to our friends, fellow-workers and families, we already possess the fundamental skills of public speaking. We need only to master the slightly altered techniques used to make sure we are understood by larger groups of people.

Occasions for public speaking

Many occasions call for short speeches. Quite often members of community organizations have little or no time to prepare their remarks beforehand. When they take part in informal discussion, or speak to a motion at a formal meeting, they must speak spontaneously, and trust to conviction and the clearness of their thinking to put across ideas.

Other times, members will have advance notice and will be able to prepare their remarks when they are asked to:

- make announcements
- introduce speakers
- thank speakers
- present gifts
- accept gifts
- propose a toast
- answer a toast
- nominate a candidate for office
- welcome new members or groups
- say farewell on retiring or leaving a group.

Sometimes the situation will call for a longer, more detailed talk, or speech, that requires a period of research, study and preparation. Officers, committee chairpersons, or spokespersons for study groups must prepare carefully and talk at some length when they:

- give information or explanations to groups
- take part in a panel discussion
- present their viewpoints in a symposium
- offer inspiration or entertainment.

How to prepare a speech

The occasion will determine the time, formalities, amount of preparation, and length of the presentation; but every speech, however short or long, has an introduction, a body and a conclusion.

Body

The body of the speech is usually worked out first. As you begin to prepare what you are going to say, ask yourself three questions:

- what is the subject, not just the title, of my speech?
- what particular points (not more than four) do I want to bring out?
- why are these points directed at this audience?

With this basic information before you, write down all the information at your command to support the points you have chosen. Write down any arguments you know of which are opposed to your proposition and prepare a rebuttal. Take as much time as possible for working out your arguments. If there is time, take a week or two to think about your speech.

Now

- ☐ Arrange all this material in order for presentation. Your original points, each with its supporting material, should be arranged in a logical sequence. The discussion of each point should lead naturally into the next.
- ☐ Begin the refining process by measuring all your statements against your answers to the question "Why are these points directed at this audience?"
- ☐ Make sure your statements will be easy to understand. If you are not certain your audience can grasp them, delete them or rewrite them in a simpler form.
- ☐ Check for double meanings. Guard against unfamiliar words and jargon, (the special vocabulary used by people thoroughly familiar with a particular subject, but meaningless to others).

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- ☐ Remove any statements which, on second thought, might seem in poor taste.

Then

- ☐ If this is your first speech, write it out, conversationally as you would talk, not as you would write an article for publication.

Now you have prepared the body, you add an introduction and a conclusion.

Conclusion

Many successful speakers prepare the conclusion before the introduction.

A good conclusion might be a summary of what has been said, a challenge to action, an appeal for further consideration, an illustration to emphasize the main points, or any combination of these.

After you have decided on the form you wish to use, work it out so that it ends with a strong, positive statement. Don't weaken the climax with any further words, not even "thank you" unless you have asked for permission to speak.

Introduction

The introduction has two purposes and it should be short. It should put the audience at ease, and it should let them know what the speech is about. If you are a beginner it is wise to write out and memorize the first two or three sentences. This assures a confident beginning. Many experienced speakers use a short phrase or sentence which the listeners may think of as the topic. This is included in the introduction and may be repeated during the course of the speech.

The short speech

A short speech is often harder to write than a long one. To be effective, short talks need careful refining. Every word must count.

The speaker must keep in mind the occasion, the audience to whom he or she is speaking, the group for whom he or she speaks, the facts that need to be given, and the time allotted.

Here are some points to remember in connection with the occasions for short speeches.

To make an announcement:

- give all the details needed
- be precise about time, place, and any requirements
- allow the audience time to absorb and remember
- avoid confusing the facts with irrelevant detail
- avoid unnecessary wordiness.

To introduce a speaker:

- mention the subject of the address, and why it has been chosen
- say why the topic is important to this particular audience
- say why this speaker has been chosen
- give the speaker's name and something about him or her without too much puffery
- leave the topic itself to the speaker.

To thank a speaker:

- offer thanks on behalf of the audience, not of yourself
- thank the speaker for what has been given in terms of information and ideas, entertainment, inspirational values
- thank him or her for any personal sacrifice of time, energy
- refrain from repeating the speech and from expressing your personal appreciation.

To present a gift:

- refer to the occasion
- remind the audience of the achievements of the recipient
- express goodwill on behalf of the audience
- present the gift.

To accept a gift:

- express thanks for yourself, or on behalf of the group you represent
- mention in some appropriate way the debt owed by you or your group to those who are presenting the gift.

To propose a toast:

- refer to the significance of the occasion
- pay a suitable tribute
- speak on behalf of the audience
- be sure to have the audience's full attention for the proposal of the toast.

To answer a toast:

- say "thank you"
- share something of yourself that is appropriate.

To nominate a candidate for office:

- name your candidate
- describe the office to be filled
- give the qualifications of your candidate
- move formal nomination
- respect the time and the requirements of the proceedings (it is easy to overdo a good thing here).

To welcome a person or group:

- mention the significance of the occasion
- express the pleasure and goodwill of the audience
- share with the audience something about the person or the group.

On retiring or leaving a group:

- express thanks for help and co-operation
- give a brief resumé of the things accomplished during your term of association
- make reference to the future.

The longer speech

How to present your speech

- ☐ After you have written your speech, read and re-read it until you are completely familiar with the sequence of thought.
- ☐ Memorize only the beginning and the ending.
- ☐ Write brief reminders of the important points in order on small cards or pieces of paper. These notes should be in ink and printed in letters large enough to be read at arm's length.
- ☐ Number the cards.
- ☐ Don't forget to take the cards when you go to speak!

Interesting and well-prepared material will be more acceptable to the audience if you keep in mind a few points about the delivery. Stand up. Speak up. Shut up!

When you are introduced, take time to move to the centre of the platform, make some natural gesture such as moving an object if you are at a table. Look at your audience for two or three seconds while you take a few deep breaths. That will help you throw off any stage fright and create an atmosphere of respect and anticipation in the audience.

Address those present. Use the appropriate form ("Mr. Chairman, Madam Chairwoman, Ladies and Gentlemen", etc.) and speak clearly and distinctly. If you can comment on some remark in the introduction or unusual situation in the meeting, you will have the advantage of getting used to the acoustics of the room, and the audience, before you begin the text of your speech. Make sure those in the back row can hear you.

Never begin with an apology such as "I'm not much of a speaker" or "I don't know why I was called upon".

Look at your audience. The audience should feel that you are talking to them. Several methods are used by experienced speakers. Some choose a few people scattered throughout the audience, who seem to be listening attentively, and talk to each of

them at different times. Other speakers focus their eyes about three-quarters of the way back and let them move from side to side as they talk. Still others will talk to the back row, but occasionally emphasize an important statement by directing it to the people immediately in front of them.

Speak up! You must project your voice enough for everyone in the audience to hear you but, at the same time, there should be enough variation in the pitch of your voice to avoid monotony. Use three inflections, a low, grave quality to express seriousness or sadness, a middle range for ordinary conversation, and a higher pitch to express happiness, excitement or indignation.

The medium range will be used for most of your speech but the other two ranges should be used where appropriate to add interest. If you have an important message, lower the pitch of your voice, not the volume. If you have an exciting statement to make, use the higher tone. We do these things naturally in ordinary conversation but sometimes forget to use them when we increase the volume of our voices for the benefit of a large audience.

Speak clearly. Often we all fall into poor habits of enunciation in the hurry of everyday life. We fail to open our mouths and we mush syllables. Listeners soon tire of a speaker if they cannot understand every word. On the other hand, we do not sound natural or interesting if every syllable is equally stressed and we sound stiff and forced. Good speech has a pattern of varied stresses like music. We should practise speaking with a relaxed jaw, making full use of the tongue, lips and teeth. If the mouth is open the words will be projected at full volume toward the audience and will not emerge muffled and dim as they do through almost-clenched teeth and taut face muscles.

Proper breathing is very important in good voice production. Use your diaphragm and fill the lower part of your lungs. A speaker who uses only the chest and upper lungs for breathing will grow short of breath. This will make him or her nervous

and tense. The consequent constriction of the muscles will cause further shortness of breath. The speaker may blame the shortness of breath on nervousness, but poor posture is the real cause.

Speaking a little more slowly than you do in ordinary conversation also helps you to breathe more deeply and naturally. It will also make it easier for the audience to understand you.

Stand in a relaxed and comfortable position but avoid any appearance of listlessness. Keep your feet together, a little apart, or one ahead of the other, whichever is comfortable. Good posture will make control of your breathing easier. Some people find it helpful to check their posture before a full-length mirror.

Good posture will help you to look keen and alert, and give the audience the feeling that you are pleased to be speaking to them. You should not grin, of course, but they will appreciate you if they feel you are enthusiastic and sincere. Don't be afraid to move about a little. Feel free to use your hands and arms to emphasize a point or to look at your notes. Be sure your movements are natural. Freedom of movement will make your talk seem easy and conversational, if you don't overdo it.

End on a strong note. Make the last statement of your speech sound as strong and positive as it seemed when you wrote it. Remember that it is not logical to say "thank you" unless you have asked for permission to speak.

Points to remember

- ☐ Careful preparation is the basis of good presentation.
- ☐ Talk to your audience — not at them.
- ☐ Think of the audience as your friends and keep them with you; speaking in public is an extension of ordinary conversation.
- ☐ Use words that your audience will understand; language must be clear, and voice loud enough to be heard.

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- ☐ Make sure of your pronunciation; check a dictionary.
 - ☐ Correct posture, relaxed and comfortable, is essential for adequate breathing and good voice production.
 - ☐ Accept interruptions graciously.
 - ☐ Be humorous only if it fits the situation. Tell stories or jokes that support your argument or apply to the immediate situation.
 - ☐ Use your own personality — be yourself.

Hints about practice

There are two principle rules for increasing your effectiveness in public speaking.

- ☐ Learn to listen objectively and critically to every speaker you hear, particularly yourself.
- ☐ Get as much practice as possible.

Take every opportunity to speak that comes your way. Read aloud stories, poetry and your own writing to imaginary audiences. Read and talk to a tape recorder, then listen to yourself. Read and talk to your family and friends and ask for their criticism. The following techniques are also helpful.

- ☐ Make notes of your conversations with friends. Then, when you have time, criticize and develop the notes.
- ☐ For practice in extemporaneous speaking, put a number of topics that interest you on slips of paper. Draw one from a hat and talk briefly about it to your family or friends.
- ☐ Read newspaper and magazine articles and then retell the main points in the form of short talks.
- ☐ Criticize your own speaking posture and gestures in a full-length mirror.
- ☐ Read aloud other people's speeches. Try to give them all the appropriate inflections of voice, and changes of pace.

Most people find it easier to follow a program of study when they work with a group. Classes in public speaking are offered in many communities. Speakers' clubs are often organized to meet the need for group study. Here are a few suggestions for practice in groups.

- ☐ Give three-minute talks on interesting books, movies or TV programs.
- ☐ Take sides on current political issues.
- ☐ Promote the campaign of a local agency such as the United Way.
- ☐ Describe favorite hobbies or sports.
- ☐ Give directions, extemporaneously, for reaching a particular place, for cooking a favorite dish, for carrying out a craft or business technique.
- ☐ The whole group might draw up a list of topics and assign them by lot to individual members for preparation and presentation.
- ☐ Group study offers opportunities to develop discussion techniques. Four or five members might discuss a subject apart from the others and then one of them might report the discussion to all the members of the class or club.

Further reading

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